



## 384 Illusion

Eve <sup>1</sup>

Montegue's expression was unreadable as he walked beside me, his silence louder than most screams.

The kind that came after the breaking point.

I pitied him, but the unexpected incident had just stoked the flames of urgency to get to the bottom of whatever the hell was going on.

"Bring in Council-grade warding equipment," he barked to one of the guards. "I want my Manor scanned room by room. Floor by floor. Nothing leaves, nothing enters without my permission. No servant steps inside until I say so."

"Yes, sir."

I pulled my arms tighter around Elliot and quickened my pace. The hallway seemed to stretch endlessly before us, the Tower now feeling colder than it had ever been.

"She never stood a chance," Montegue



murmured suddenly. "Lucinda. She walked in there thinking she could see her daughter, speak to her like a mother would... and that thing wrapped around her soul like smoke."

I hoped it were that simple, that this 'spell' could be broken.

I looked at him carefully. "She tried to fight it. That still means something."

"It means we've underestimated Felicia," he said bitterly. "Again."

The elevator ride was excruciating.

By the time we reached the parking lot, transport was already waiting. A black obsidian car sat idling at the gates, sleek, warded, reinforced. Gammas lined the perimeter.

I buckled Elliot in beside me. He clung to my hand silently, his green eyes wide and glassy, still too quiet for his age. Still too haunted.

I knew my son.

I could tell exactly what he was thinking right this moment.



He felt guilt; he blamed himself.

I smoothed down his hair and dropped a kiss on his cheek. "It's not your fault," I whispered before pulling away.

Montegue slid into the seat across from us.

I met his gaze. "When we get there, I want to search her room first."

He nodded. "You'll have it. I've already told them to unlock everything."

The ride through Obsidian Capital was a blur of motion and memory. Every turn reminded me of that day at the Tower, the explosion, the blood, the chaos. People were on the streets, as expected, with banners and signs, protesting.

"Where is the transparency?"

"Power without protection is tyranny."

I closed my eyes, unwilling to torture myself or let my heart sink even further.

And I couldn't shake the feeling that something still lingered just beneath the surface. Waiting. Watching.





The gates of Montegue Manor creaked open like the jaws of a beast.

The grounds were eerily still. No welcoming steward. No servants in sight. Even the ever-burning hearths at the entrance had been extinguished.

"Why is it so quiet?" I asked.

Montegue stepped out first, hand already on his dagger. "Because I gave the order hours ago. Everyone out. Every last one of them."

I exited the vehicle with Elliot, holding him close. The wind bit at my cloak.

"Bring Lucinda here as soon as she stabilizes," Montegue added to one of the guards. "She'll be safest behind my personal wards. If anyone even breathes wrong in this house, I want them detained."

He turned to me. "Ready?"

I nodded.

We entered the Manor. It was cold. Not just in temperature, but in presence, like the walls themselves were holding their breath. Or maybe



it was all in my head.

"I don't like this," Rhea whispered in my mind.

Neither did I. 2

The portraits seemed to watch us as we passed. Echoes of power, pride, and secrets clung to every inch of the ancestral halls. Somewhere in this house, Felicia had hidden something. Or someone.

The whole house was a disaster, as though an hurricane had ran through it. I could see Hades' previous search all over it: He had been thorough.

Some relief cooled off some of my anxiety. There was proof that Hades had been through here. There was a trail to follow.

We reached her bedroom door.

Montegue hesitated, then turned the knob and pushed it open.

What greeted us wasn't what I expected

The room was unlike the rest of the uttering upturned house; it was clean.



No dark bloodstains. No ritual markings. No locked trunks full of cursed items.

Just... perfection.

The room was pristine. Too pristine. The bed was made, the sheets tucked tight. The shelves were dusted. The curtains fluttered slightly from the open balcony.

But there was nothing human in it. No shoes by the bed. No scattered brushes or hair ties. No scent.

It felt... sanitized. It could have been a well-crafted illusion, with how perfect it was.

I slipped my finger along the surface of the vanity and inspected it. Not a speck of dust.

"When was the last time it was cleaned?"

"The moment Hades said he was going to search the manor, I seized all operation so no more evidence would be tampered with.

"It's been more than 24 hours since this room was cleaned, yet not a speck of dust. If Hades passed through here looking for clues as to where Kael might have been taken..."





Montegue took the words straight out of my mouth. "He would have turned this place to ashes to find a singular pin."

I nodded, adjusting Elliot in my arms while my eyes roved the entire perimeter of the room. "Yet everything is pristine. Not even dust has gathered. Almost like the room is resisting the passage of time itself." 2

Montegue stepped closer to the vanity, his eyes narrowing. "That's not natural," he muttered. "I can feel it in my bones."

I set Elliot down gently on the small velvet bench beside the wardrobe. He curled in on himself, quiet as a shadow, but I could feel the tension in his limbs—like he was bracing for something even worse.

I crossed the room slowly, letting my fingers brush along the seams of the bookshelf, the edges of the paintings, the frame of the mirror.

"The mirror..."

My head snapped to Elliot. "What, dear?"

He blinked slowly. "The mirror is broken."



I turned to the mirror, confused. Last I had checked, it was as pristine and as untouched as the rest of the room. I twisted back to him.

"The room is not clean, Mummy," he told me, looking around as confused as everybody else.

"That is not what I see." 1

I froze, Montegue and I exchanging looks.

But before we could ask what he meant, ever the quiet observer, Elliot slid off the bench and walked toward the center of the room, small hands brushing the edges of the air as if trying to part curtains no one else could see.

He pointed. "The bed isn't made. It's messy. The pillows are on the floor."

Montegue's brow furrowed. "What?"

"The books," Elliot continued softly. "They're everywhere. Scattered. The bookshelf looks like someone grabbed it and shook it."

My heart skipped. I turned to look, but the room remained pristine to me. The bed was perfectly made. The shelves untouched.

Then Elliot stepped in front of the mirror.





He tilted his head.

"The mirror is broken," he whispered again. "But not cracked. It's... punched."

I inhaled sharply, something cold rushing into my chest like ice water.

"And there's blood," he added, his small voice almost a whisper. "Right in the middle. A fistprint. It's smeared. Someone hit it very hard."

My throat tightened. "Blood?" I repeated, nearly choking on the word.

Elliot nodded solemnly, his green eyes still fixed on the phantom image the rest of us couldn't see. "Because Mam—" he paused, correcting himself with a swallow, "Felicia... used to hit the mirrors when she was mad. But this one... this person was really mad. Like... screaming-inside-their-heart mad."

Montegue looked at me, and for the first time since we entered, I saw his hand tremble. 1

